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Curtis founded as fuel stop for trains

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The Thomas Mill at Curtis suffered damage from a tornado in 1950

Curtis, Clark County, Arkansas

The community of Curtis, south of Arkadelphia on U.S. Highway 67, was first established in the 1870s along the route of the Iron Mountain Railroad. Railroad officials chose the location as a fuel stop along the rail line, about halfway between Arkadelphia and Gurdon. At first, trains picked up wood there, and later, they stopped for coal.

The first train to receive supplies at the Curtis fuel chute arrived on June 30, 1873. A group of area residents celebrated the event, but realized the place had no name. According to local legend, the train's engineer stated that he had never had a town named for him, so his name—Curtis—was proposed. The name stuck. Perhaps many of the community's residents moved there as a result of its inclusion in railroad company brochures which extolled the virtues of lands along the rail lines.

Settlement was sufficient enough to create a need for postal service to the community. The Curtis post office was established in 1874, with David Teague as postmaster. Others to serve in that capacity in the early days include Jesse Adams, James Bourland, Thomas Alford, William Alford, Alverta Bourland, John Louis, Jacob Stroop, Oliver Guyinn, Clara Price, James Mohnkern, Mary Ewing, Walter Ewing, Mary Mohnkern, Mrs. Lester Stewart, and Virgie Tucker.

Largely attracted by the presence of the railroad, people moved to the area, but it remained largely rural. By 1880, the U.S. census reported a handful of families living there. Forests surrounding the area proved to be the driving force behind the community's growth. Curtis offered the great benefit of convenient transportation for those timber products, and many sawmills sprang up in the area to seize the opportunities presented by rich natural resources and an efficient mode of transportation. The Thomas Mill there was the largest and enjoyed the longest existence. The Thomas facility not only included a sawmill, but also dry kilns, a planing mill, lumber sheds, and open storage lumber stacks. Many of the mill's employees lived in an area adjacent to the mill known as "Mill Camp." A commissary supplied company employees with groceries and other merchandise well into the 1920s. The Thomas family operated the mill until it was destroyed by fire in 1952.

A railroad depot served Curtis along with the mill. Agents scheduled cars for lumber and other forest products, and there was also some passenger service. Mail also arrived via the rail line. A Curtis-based section crew maintained the railroad for several miles; others who traveled to the area to work on the line arrived in an open-top rail car. A number of grocery stores also served residents. Among the store owners were Bud Deaton, Mr. Mohnkern, T.A. Beene, Mrs. Stroud, the Stewarts, the Tuckers, and Harry Hudman.

One of the interesting events from the town's history was the bivouac of an army detachment there in the summer of 1940, just before the beginning of World War II. The men stayed for several weeks, and while there, built a warehouse on the grounds of the Curtis School. The school consolidated with Arkadelphia in the early 1960s.